

Guitar Hero

By Stephen Gauer

The nadir of my music career was grade seven choir, where I was ordered by the music teacher to stand in the back row with four other shlubs who couldn't carry a tune and lip-synch the lyrics to a dozen carols at the annual Xmas concert. We felt cheap and worthless. Silently in my heart I vowed revenge.

It took a few years. I bought my first guitar in a Church Street pawnshop in 1968. I was 16. The guitar cost 80 bucks. I taught myself to read music, let my nail-bitten fingernails grow long enough to finger pick and mastered tunes like Somewhere Over The Rainbow and Streets of Laredo from a Mel Bay instruction book.

Year after year I played, mostly in secret, mostly alone because I was terribly shy. Music was a way to withdraw from the world, to relax, to dream, to create something beautiful and transient (and all the more beautiful for being transient), to express the inexpressible, to forget unhappiness and loneliness.

Mostly I played classical guitar music, which is very proper and refined, calm and introverted. This seemed an appropriate choice for the introvert that I was, or imagined myself to be. Classical guitar, I decided, was an introvert's best and truest friend.

Then one day two years ago I looked at my guitar and realized I'd been playing for almost forty years, practicing scales, memorizing chord shapes, learning bits and pieces but never really mastering anything. And I was no longer the introvert I'd once imagined myself to

be. I'd become a chattier, nosier, bolder and more sociable version of myself.

Why not play blues instead? Blues has oomph and power, sex and grime, plenty of attitude. I knew some names: Howlin' Wolf, BB King, Muddy Waters, Clapton. You only need three chords to play a blues song and the solos are extremely cool and best of all you can play the blues at any age, including middle age, and not appear completely ridiculous.

So I bought a guitar, a beautiful brand-new electric guitar, the same model that Eric Clapton plays. I bought the same guitar strings that Clapton uses. These actions were like offerings to a god, in the hope that some of the magic would rub off on me.

I set up a rehearsal corner in the basement. I bought some blues books and tried to teach myself. I played for an hour every night for six months and learned a measly seven songs, none of which I could play even moderately well from beginning to end.

Instead of giving up, I took lessons from an excellent teacher named Chris, who shared my enthusiasm for blues and tried his best to teach me Crossroads, a blues song recorded in 1968 by Clapton. The first guitar solo is only 45 seconds long, but it has 196 notes in it, and believe me, most of those notes are quite impossible to play.

Discouragement set in again. Then I made a new friend. Marc is almost thirty years younger than I am. He plays guitar and sings, and likes a lot of the same music I do. Best of all, he has genuine talent. Somehow we began to play together, at first in a downtown, 15-buck-an-hour rehearsal room where the caretaker praised our "professionalism" (meaning we didn't drink beer or smash the equipment) and then in my basement.

Thanks to Marc, a new world opened up for me. I was learning songs and making music with another musician. It didn't matter that my playing was less than perfect, that I flubbed a few notes or occasionally missed a chord. Marc was patient and very forgiving. After every runthrough, he'd smile at me and say, "I think we're starting to sound pretty good!".

We practised five songs for two hours, one night a week for five months, and by the miracle of repetition got better and better. Even Colville, my black Lab, began to hang out with us during rehearsals. We boldly made plans for our debut at the Open Mike night at Fitzgerald's, a friendly bar in my neighbourhood, playing the best three of our five songs.

Playing music in front of an audience for the first time is a lot like losing your virginity: the wait to go on is excruciating, you're very self conscious while you're doing it, it's over much too quickly, and at the end you realize you'll enjoy it much more the second time.

I felt the pleasurable terror of the virgin as we plugged in. The emcee asked us what we were called. I said, "Marc and Stephen" and he laughed and I said "That's alphabetical order" and he laughed again.

He introduced us and Marc struck the opening chords of Walk Don't Run and the terror fell away. I wasn't nervous so much as self conscious (a subtle but important difference) and I couldn't look at the audience. But when we segued neatly on a C chord into the opening of the Stones' You Can't Always Get What You Want, I could feel their sense of surprise. We had their attention.

The song ended, and then we did Dock of the Bay. We finished with Hallelujah and after Marc sang the third verse I played a little solo. Nothing fancy, nothing Clapton-like, but it my first solo and I knew every

note because I'd created it. I tried to play it with soul and with joy because that's what the song is about.

Then suddenly we reached the end. We hit the last chord together, perfectly, just as we'd rehearsed and Marc turned to me and smiled as he always did at the end of a song. The applause was brief but immeasurably sweet. I felt equal waves of pride, and pleasure, and sheer relief that it was over. A cigarette would have been perfect.